

## Chapter 2



USFWS

*Cat Point Creek*

## The Planning Process

- The Comprehensive Planning Process
- Issues, Concerns, and Opportunities

## The Comprehensive Conservation Planning Process

Service policy (602 FW 3) establishes an eight-step planning process that also facilitates compliance with NEPA (figure 2.1). The full text of the policy and a detailed description of the planning steps can be viewed at <http://policy.fws.gov/602fw3.html>. We followed the process depicted below in developing this final CCP.

Since 1996, we have focused on conserving lands within the approved refuge boundary, facilitating wildlife-dependent public uses, managing habitat for several focus species, such as grassland birds and bald eagles, and establishing relationships with the community and our partners. In 2005, we began to prepare for developing a CCP by collecting information on refuge resources and mapping its habitats. We convened our core team, which consists of refuge staff, Regional Office staff, our VA Fisheries Coordinator, and representatives of the VDGIF. We discussed management issues, drafted a vision statement and tentative goals, and compiled a project mailing list of known stakeholders, interested individuals, organizations, and agencies. We also conducted a wilderness review, evaluated wild and scenic rivers potential, and summarized our biological inventory and monitoring information. We initiated all of those steps as part of “Step A: Preplanning.”

In November 2005, we started “Step B: Initiate Public Involvement and Scoping.” On November 1, we formally announced the start of the planning process in a Notice of Intent in the *Federal Register*. Also in November, we distributed a newsletter to approximately 310 individuals, organizations and agencies, announcing we were beginning the planning process and asking people if they wanted to remain on our mailing list.

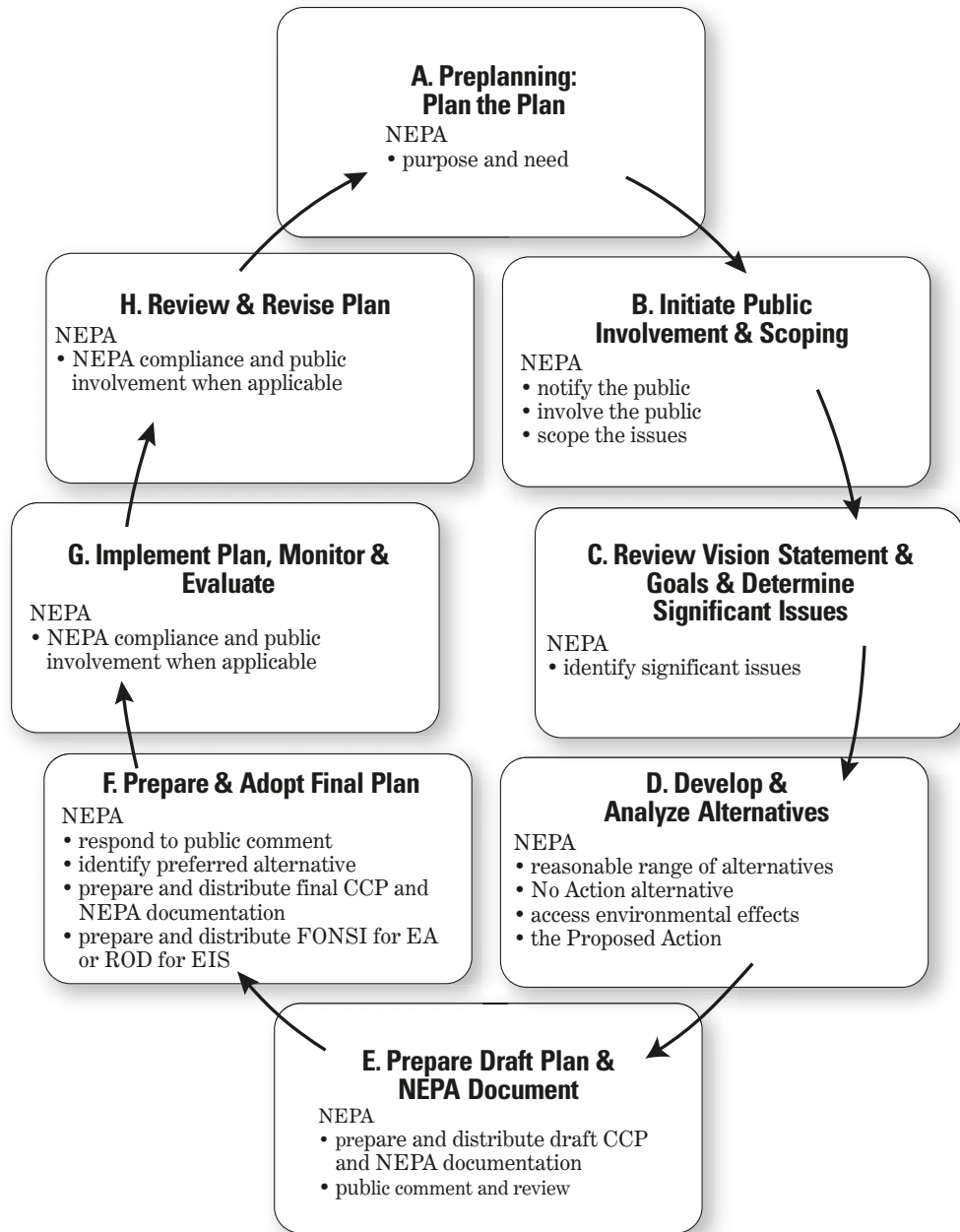
In December 2005, we distributed copies of a planning newsletter and issues workbook to everyone on that list. Those workbooks asked people to share what they valued most about the refuge, their vision for its future and the Service role in their community, and any other issues they wanted to raise. We received 32 completed workbooks.

Early in December, we held public scoping meetings in Richmond, Port Royal, and Warsaw, Virginia, to identify public issues and concerns, share our draft vision statement and tentative goals, describe the planning process, and explain how people could become involved and stay informed about the process. Those meetings helped us identify the public concerns we would need to address in the planning process. We announced their locations, dates, and times in local newspapers, in special mailings, and on our website. Forty-five people attended those public meetings. Since then, we have also solicited public issues and concerns regularly from individuals through visitor contacts, refuge-sponsored events, community-sponsored events in which the refuge participated, and answered invitations to speak to community organizations.

Throughout 2006, we worked on “Step C: Review Vision Statement, Goals, and Identify Significant Issues”. We held a technical workshop to seek advice from technical experts on what resources of conservation concern in the refuge planning area should be a management priority. We also met with elected officials, our state partners, and other Service divisions to apprise them of the status of the project and exchange technical information.

For much of 2006 and into 2007, we worked on “Step D: Develop and Analyze Alternatives.” We compiled and analyzed various management alternatives to serve as the foundation for developing the draft CCP/EA. We distributed to our mailing list and posted on our website a planning update newsletter in April 2006.

**Figure 2.1. The Comprehensive Conservation Planning Process and its Relationship to the National Environmental Policy Act**



That newsletter shared our goals, provided an update on CCP activities, and summarized the key issues we would address in this CCP

Also in 2006, the USGS Fort Collins Science Center helped us develop and implement a community survey to provide us with information on public satisfaction, preferences, and expectations regarding our current and proposed refuge management. We randomly selected more than 1,200 residences near the refuge to receive that survey questionnaire. The final report on the survey

provided valuable information for our management proposals. We distributed an executive summary of its results in October 2007; that summary appeared as appendix G in the draft CCP/EA. You may request the full report from refuge headquarters in print copy or on CD-ROM, or view it online at <http://www.fort.usgs.gov/products/publications/>.

In May 2007, we distributed another newsletter summarizing the three management alternatives we analyzed in detail for the draft CCP/EA. That completed Step D.

Our draft CCP/EA fulfilled “Step E: Prepare Draft Plan and NEPA document.” We published a Notice of Availability in the *Federal Register* on July 23, 2009 announcing its release for public review and comment. During the 35-day comment period from July 23 to August 28, 2009, we held two public meetings. We received comments by regular mail, electronic mail, and at the public meetings. Appendix G is a summary of the comments we received and our responses to them.

This CCP was submitted to our Regional Director for approval. He determined it warrants a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI; see Appendix H) and found its analysis sufficient to simultaneously issue his decision adopting this CCP. We announced his final decision by publishing a Notice of Availability in the *Federal Register*, where we also notified people of the availability of the CCP. This completes “Step F: Prepare and Adopt a Final Plan.”

“Step G: Implement Plan, Monitor and Evaluate” can now begin with approval of this CCP. As part of “Step H: Review and Revise Plan,” we will modify or revise the final CCP as warranted following the procedures in Service policy (602 FW 1, 3, and 4) and NEPA requirements. Minor revisions that meet the criteria for categorical exclusions (550 FW 3.3C) will require only an environmental action memorandum. As the Improvement Act and Service policy stipulate, we will review and revise the CCP fully every 15 years.



Ovenbird nest

USFWS

## Leading Issues, Concerns, and Opportunities

We define an issue as “any unsettled matter requiring a management decision.” That can be an “initiative, opportunity, resource management problem, threat to a resource, conflict in use, or a public concern.” Issues arise from many sources, including our staff, other Service programs, state agencies, other Federal agencies, our partners, neighbors, user groups, or Congress. The following summary provides a context for the issues that arose during the planning process.

### Habitat and Species Management

National wildlife refuges primarily promote the conservation wildlife and habitats. That is our highest priority, and serves as the foundation for all that we do. Many refuges were established for a very specific purpose, such as protecting a particular species or habitat. Based on the several purposes for this refuge, and the discussions that took place up to the time of its establishment, the primary justifications for creating it were protecting bald eagles and wetlands along the lower Rappahannock River, and protecting a regionally important waterfowl migration and feeding area.

How best to protect, restore, and or enhance wetlands and their associated species on the refuge is an important issue we address in this final plan. We heard many opinions on specific actions or techniques to accomplish that. Some of those suggestions fall outside our jurisdiction. Some we can accomplish best in partnership with other Federal or state agencies. Others expressed concerns that our current management (e.g., restrictions on public use and access to protect wildlife and habitats) was impinging on the public use and enjoyment of the river, and recommended a more conservative approach to setting refuge regulations.

Most of the refuge acreage is upland habitat. Our management of that acreage, which also can directly affect wetlands nearby, is also an important management concern. Many migratory birds of conservation concern depend on those upland habitats when breeding, wintering, or migrating. We heard a range of opinions on which habitat types we should emphasize and which Federal trust and state species of concern should be a management focus. Some of those recommendations, in particular those for grassland and early successional forest habitats, can be labor-intensive.

The following key issues and concerns arose concerning habitat and species management.

- What is the appropriate amount and distribution of grasslands habitat to manage on the refuge?
- Is there a role for cooperative farming on the refuge?
- How can we effectively and economically control invasive plants, which are affecting the quality of habitats we provide on the refuge?
- What are the most effective and efficient measures we can undertake to protect, restore, and conserve wetlands and riparian habitats on the refuge and throughout the lower Rappahannock River?
- Can we mitigate the predicted effect of global climate change through our habitat management?

### Land Protection

Changes in land use and associated impacts that threaten the integrity of natural resources in the lower Rappahannock River area are increasingly a concern. Recently, we have observed lands that once provided contiguous habitat are being sub-divided, primarily into residential lots. Although local communities may desire some of that development, our level of concern rises when those areas destroy



or degrade important wildlife habitat, degrade water quality, restrict what was once public access to recreation areas, or spoil the rural landscape. In addition, those changes elevate the potential threat from invasive and exotic plants, which are becoming increasingly widespread and difficult to control. Our community survey revealed that, overall, community members are not in favor of increased development along rivers and streams.

Many organizations, including state and Federal agencies, are involved in protecting and conserving those qualities we mentioned on the lower Rappahannock River. We work with our conservation partners to identify sensitive wildlife habitat in need of protection or restoration. We also collaborate in outreach, education, research, and private landowner assistance. Service land acquisition, through either fee purchase or conservation easement from willing sellers, is one of the most important tools we use to conserve important areas of wildlife habitat. Up to 20,000 acres is approved for acquisition at the Rappahannock River Valley refuge. That land acquisition program garners a lot of public interest and attention. We heard directly from people who support our efforts to acquire and manage important habitat areas. Others were supportive as long as we allow public use and access on those lands. Some indicated a preference for the purchase of conservation easements, rather than purchase in full fee title. Others expressed concerns over the Service taking land out of the local tax base or taking agricultural land out of production. We address those concerns in our proposed management direction.

The following key issues and concerns arose about land protection and acquisition.

- How can we address community concern over the loss of agricultural land production through Service acquisition?
- How should we prioritize lands for acquisition within the approved acquisition boundary? Do the original acquisition priorities (1996 EA) reflect our current priorities? Should predictions of climate change affect our decisions?
- How do we manage the conservation easements purchased for the refuge? In future easement acquisitions, what rights should the Service purchase?

## **Public Use/Community Relations**

Our goal is to become an integral part of the socioeconomic health and quality of life of the communities we affect. The challenge for us is to understand the visions of the respective communities and our role in them while adhering to our mission. We also need to determine how best to nurture and cultivate the mutually beneficial relationships we have developed using the resources we have available.

During public scoping, and because of our community survey, we learned that many people are vaguely aware of the refuge, but are not particularly knowledgeable about the opportunities and services we offer. Others mentioned that they are noticing an increase in public awareness because of our refuge events and programs, and media attention. Some suggested ways we might conduct additional outreach. Others recommended additional recreational activities desired in the local communities. To them, providing more recreational opportunities was the best way to increase community interest and involvement in the refuge. Finally, some who felt well informed and satisfied about refuge activities valued the contribution of the refuge to the community and their quality of life.

In response to those comments and the issues below, we evaluated a range of quality, wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities, and have proposed measures to promote Service visibility, community understanding and support for refuge programs.

The following are key issues or concerns that arose about public uses and community relations.

- How do we effectively conduct outreach to explain our regulations on beach use on the river?
- What administrative facilities, such as an office, visitor contact facilities, and roads are needed to manage the refuge, and where should they be located?
- How do we improve the visibility of the Service and the refuge in the local community?
- How can we deal with the potentially negative impact of roaming hunting dogs on wildlife, visitors, and neighbors?
- What other opportunities can we provide for compatible, priority, wildlife-dependent public uses?